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Ballard given life term in Lawler beating death

By Jim Mason
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John Robert Ballard, 17, was sentenced today to life in prison for the murder of former Richmond City Councilman J. Edward Lawler.

The frail-looking Richmond youth, standing in the same South Richmond courtroom where he confessed to the killing, showed no emotion as Judge William E. Spain imposed the maximum sentence for first-degree murder.

Before imposing the sentence, Spain expressed the belief that, given Ballard's personality, susceptibility to being influenced by others and his admitted use of drugs, the youth was capable of committing a similar crime again. Spain also said there was a difference between "the impersonality" of a pilot or soldier killing the enemy in war and the brutal killing of Lawler.

Testifying in his trial six weeks ago, Ballard, a 5-foot-8, 140-pound

teen-ager, told of repeatedly beating the 74-year-old Lawler with two-foot-long bolt-cutters in Lawler's home at 5011 Riverside Drive last Dec. 30.

Ballard, of the 400 block LaSalle Drive, told of going there with three others to rob Lawler.

A jury found him guilty of the first-degree murder count, and Spain delayed sentencing until today to allow time for preparation of a background report on the youth.

In the courtroom today, Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Warren B. Von Schuch called for the maximum

punishment. The prosecutor called the Lawler's killing "a brutal crime" and "an incredibly cruel act."

Use of drugs cited

One of his Ballard's lawyers, Sterling H. Moore, asked Spain to take into account Ballard's age and that he has no prior criminal record. Moore alluded to Ballard's use of drugs and said his client was not his normal self in the attack on Lawler.

Ballard, who will turn 18 Aug. 1, will be able to apply for parole after serving 15 years of the life sentence.

He became the second person to be sentenced for Lawler's murder.



John Robert Ballard receives the maximum sentence.

Four weeks ago, Carl G. Simons, 26, of Powhatan, was sentenced to 60 years in prison by a jury that found him guilty of first-degree murder

also in Lawler's killing.

Simons did not testify, but the jurors heard a tape recording in which Simons corroborated Ballard's account of going to Lawler's home to rob him.

The recording was made by Richmond Detective James S. Gaudet as he questioned Simons about the murder.

Both Ballard and Simons told of Ballard's 18-year-old sister, Juanita, and Timothy N. Dickenson, 20, going along with them in Simons' car to Lawler's home that night. Both also told how the four of them had "shot up crank," an amphetamine drug, at the Jefferson Village apartment of Dickenson's girlfriend, earlier that evening.

They left the dying Lawler, who was a lawyer and also a former FBI agent, and took only a wooden jewelry box containing a few coins and a pair of cuff links, according to testimony at both trials.

Four days later, Simons told a man working at a Jefferson Davis Highway used car lot about the killing. The man turned out to be a state police informer, and information from him led to the arrests of the four defendants.

Miss Ballard, also of the 400 block LaSalle Ave., and Dickenson, of the 200 block Jefferson Village Drive, also face trial on first-degree murder charges. Their cases were continued Monday until Aug. 8 for the setting of trial dates.